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Critical Reflections on Online Learner Support Programmes at the University of the South Pacific

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Abstract

Learner support has been described as the provision of support programmes by an educational institution to facilitate and enhance students' learning experiences. At the University of the South Pacific, Student Learning Support (SLS) presence is quite strong at its main campus in Laucala since staff and resources are physically situated here. Similar opportunities have not been available to students at the other campuses until 2017. Students at these other campuses thus have been heavily reliant on face to face visits and for support that was provided online. Some online platforms providing this support have been REACT – a video conferencing tool, Moodle and email communication. In 2015 the Faculty of Business and Economics SLS managed to support some students at the Alafua and Emalus campuses through REACT and email. While these support mechanisms had been the same over the years, a different approach was undertaken this time. This paper describes the learning support process provided to students and recommends that students need to be 'pushed' into using such services.

Introduction

The purposes of this article are two-fold. First, it describes the efforts undertaken by the Faculty of Business and Economics' Student Learning Support (SLS) section to provide students who are located away from the main campus of the University of the South Pacific (USP) with online learner support opportunities. Second, it postulates that student use of online learner support facilities can be encouraged through embedding academic skills into course curriculum components, and by making the exercise of seeking such learning support mandatory for specific aspects of an assignment.

Learner support has been broadly described as the interactive processes between the learner and the institution that supports learning (Tait, 1995, p.232) and can be categorised into two main areas (Thorpe, 2003, p. 203). One comprises elements relating to course administration such as course counselling and enrolment. The other category consists of pedagogical activities such as study and numeracy skills, strategies for coping with tertiary studies, and self-management, which enable the successful completion of a course. For distance and flexible learners, where the traditional face to face support may not be frequently possible, technology-based pedagogies need to be provided so that students are able to experience similar interactive opportunities as face to face students.

Over time, there has been much reconceptualisation of the term 'learner support'. Tait's (2014, pp. 9-10) outline of the various historical phases experienced by UK's Open University support model reflects its transition from an autonomous structure to one that integrates study skills with course components. This shift is an important realisation of the role that academic skills play in fulfilling course assignment requirements. By treating academic skills as complementary to course content, students learn how to

generate knowledge as circumscribed by the discipline allowing them to address assignment instructions according to expectations of the course and lecturer.

The provision of learner support services is considered quite instrumental in aiding the learning process for a student, however, these services remain underutilised for various reasons. According to De Fazio et al (2000, p. 6) students usually carry a 'quick fix' attitude which prevents them from developing appropriate study skills and continuing with such support. For students from the Pacific, such as those at USP, their inability and reluctance to incorporate learner support for the duration of their studies can be attributed to poor self-management skills (Hogan, 2010). Ane and Sua'al'i-Sauni (1996), Koloto, Katoanga and Tatila (2006) mention the desire for culturally specific support which may not always be available. Such support requires creating a culturally relevant environment (Chu, Abella, & Paurini, 2013) where students' preferred learning styles are recognised and considered for further learning opportunities.

Another reason attributed to underuse of learner support services is the perception that such services are intended only for students who are at risk of failing their courses (De Fazio et al, 2000). This in turn creates the image that learner support functions as a remedial provision. This attitude can be prevalent among students as well as staff.

Background

The University of the South Pacific (USP) serves 12 South Pacific island countries and has a total of 14 campuses, with 3 located in Fiji. Student Learning Support (SLS) services were established quite early at USP. It was initially known as the English Resource Unit (ERU) (Khan, 2000, p. 45) but underwent two name changes, becoming the Centre for the Enhancement of Learnings and Teaching, and Centre for the Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) until it became known as Student Learning Support or SLS. SLS was decentralised in 2009 into the respective faculties of the university as part of a restructuring process. This shift was intended to redirect the usual practice of providing generic skills to those that were learner focused and discipline oriented and thus in line with the new conceptual model described by Tait (2014). SLS offers three main programmes. These are academic and study skills sessions, a Peer Mentoring programme - which is complemented by the Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) - and individual or one on one academic support for assignments and writing.

SLS extends these programmes through online modes for students who are not able to attend sessions and for those studying at the other campuses since there had been no stable SLS presence at the sites. These modes are: email for specific requirements pertaining to assignments and study skills; Academic Skills Workshops conducted through a video-conferencing platform known as Remote Educational and Conferencing Tool (REACT); typically one outreach visit per semester to an outer campus with face to face support taking place for the week. An e-mentoring support programme also exists (Anzeg, Sharma, B., Sharma, A., 2016) but this has been exclusive to students undertaking courses with the Faculty of Science, Technology and Environment (FSTE) of USP.

SLS has always been physically located at the main campus in Laucala, Fiji. As a result, students at the other campuses have been denied the level of support received by students at the main campus in Fiji. Two exceptions remain. Emalus campus (Vanuatu) had an SLS staff member from around 2006 until 2013. Meanwhile, the SLS staff based in Alafua campus (Samoa), also since 2006, was relocated to Laucala campus in 2010. In order to provide equitable SLS support services in the outer campuses and in

accordance to the *USP Strategic Plan 2013-2018*, Priority Area 2, Objective 5 (University of the South Pacific, 2013, p.24), SLS centres were established for the Lautoka (Fiji) campus in 2015, the Kiribati campus in 2016 and the Emalus, Honiara (Solomon Islands), Alafua (Samoa) and Labasa (Fiji) campuses in 2017.

Learner Support has always been under used by students based at locations away from Laucala campus (Commonwealth of Learning, 2014, p. 21). Reasons range from absence of SLS staff at the larger campuses to enable face to face contact, students being expected to access support through their own initiative, poor internet accessibility and irregular email communication between SLS staff and students. The latter is again compounded by travelling expenses and accessibility to computers.

There are a number of external reasons for poor attendance during REACT sessions as well. One of the reasons is that priority for booking REACT sessions are always given to academic courses. The remaining slots are then availed for other sections or groups who intend to use them. Usually the slots that are available are those that are either during the early hours or late hours of the day. SLS staff experienced this issue when attempting to schedule Academic Skills sessions. These times tend to make it difficult for students who travel from remote locations to attend sessions. Time differences between some campuses and Laucala also impacts attendance (Yusuf, 2009). Additionally, due to limited funds to support their travelling expenses, some students only visit the campus when they have classes (Napwatt, 2008).

Low attendance in learning support sessions can also be attributed to lack of motivation, low priority given to study skills sessions and poor self-management skills where organising study is concerned. To combat this situation, academic staff are requested to assist and promote SLS services and encourage students to attend sessions. In many cases, however, students are expected to regulate their attendance at these sessions since successful online and distance learning relies on the expectation that learners will take responsibility for managing their own learning (Moore, 1973).

ICT Use at USP

USP has two network infrastructure systems, AARNET (LAN), which facilitates internet connectivity and USPNET (WAN) a satellite based communications network (Bhartu, 2016). In its efforts to provide learners with interactive online learning platforms, there have been consistent upgrades and maintenance to USPNET to ensure that communication services are adequate and able to sustain distance learning (Chandra, Koroivulaono & Hazelman, 2011). There was also an increase in internet quota in 2014 to allow students to continue benefitting from internet facilities.

Despite upgrades to USPNET (Chandra, Koroivulaono, & Hazelman, 2011) internet connectivity can be very slow in many of the small island campuses having serious use implications for students. For example, Koroivulaono (2014) found through her study that online courses with large sized resources posed problems with downloading for students in the outer campuses. Furthermore, student use of internet is controlled by student quota which may be reserved for core components like completing activities for academic courses on Moodle. As such, students may not want to use their quota for additional, supplementary resources and activities that support their learning.

Other considerations for ICT use by USP students depend on student preparedness (Moala, 2002, p. 448) and the need for appropriate and relevant pedagogy and cultural inclusivity (Thaman, 2001, pp. 9 - 10).

The latter has been an underlying concern for Pacific students, and has been repeatedly raised with regards to marginalising students, who not only are accustomed to teacher-controlled learning environments, and therefore need a more socially constructed environment for learning. Thaman maintains this may not be always possible through online platforms. Recent studies regarding ICT use at USP, however, show a change in learning preferences. For instance, Raturi, Hogan and Thaman (2011) demonstrate through a survey that USP students claim readiness to use ICT at USP. Reddy and Sharma's (2015) study, which documents students' use of mobile devices such as the tablet computer, supports and validates that Pacific students are very enthusiastic about learning through such modes. Additionally, Evans (2002, p. 461) reports that facilities such as teleconferencing actually enable students to break away from cultural passivity that are usually nurtured through traditional modes of learning and teaching.

ICT use at USP has both its advantages and limitations for students. The fact remains, however, that for students who are not able to easily access resources, ICT may provide the necessary support for successful completion of their courses. In fact, ICT should be maximally used to ensure that all forms of support are accessed and the learning process remains unaffected.

Active Intervention for SLS

SLS had been conducting weekly Academic Skills sessions for students throughout the semesters since 2010 for students located at the other campuses through REACT but this service was stopped in 2015 due to the challenges experienced in coordinating the activity. SLS also communicates with students requiring one on one academic support through email and this too has remained relatively low. Students are informed of these services through their course outlines at the start of the semester. Information details include name and contact details of faculty SLS staff to whom students can refer for academic support. Students and staff are also informed of the Academic Skills sessions through an All Staff and Students email. For outside Laucala, SLS staff coordinating this activity informs Campus Directors about the sessions. The Campus Directors then inform staff at the campuses to ensure that students are aware of the sessions and are encouraged to attend.

Two major online mechanisms have been used over the years until 2015 and the section below outlines a change in learner use as a result of intervention initiatives by course lecturers in semester 2, 2014. An analysis of student attendance for REACT sessions for a period of 6 years consistently shows low attendance of students outside of Laucala Campus, with the exception of the increase in semester 2, 2014.

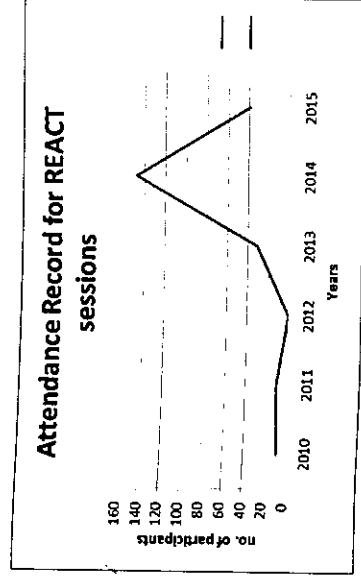


Figure 1. Student Attendance during REACT based Academic Skills sessions by SLS, USP

There have been no active surveys undertaken to ascertain actual reasons for such low attendance, however, anecdotal evidence from students was consistent with research evidence (Evans, 2002, p. 454) for ICT use in regional campuses.

It is noteworthy that attendance in 2014 was relatively higher in comparison to the other years for both the Alafua and Emalus campuses. A single factor contributed to this increase and its non-existence in 2015 led to the drop in attendance as is evident in the chart. In 2014, two academic staff took on the responsibility of leading students to SLS services. REACT sessions were scheduled specifically by the Faculty of Business and Economics (FBE) SLS staff. Through email correspondence, two academic staff were identified (one from Alafua and one from Emalus) who could work with the FBE SLS staff. These staff members were informed of the academic skills sessions and they took on the responsibility of ensuring that students attended these sessions. In fact the students were told that the sessions would help them in their upcoming assignments (Refer to workshop titles in Table 1 below).

As is listed in the table below, attendance was at an all-time high. In total, there were 117 students from Alafua campus spread over for three sessions, and 31 from the Emalus campus for one session. An FBE SLS staff visited the Alafua campus and as part of their outreach programme conducted a few face to face academic skills sessions. It was noted that attendance for REACT sessions after this did not attract similar numbers to that prior to the visit to Alafua. The Emalus campus students had attended in response to an assignment requirement and thereafter their numbers declined too. This situation brings to light two important points to consider when planning a REACT session. First, academic staff need to incorporate the SLS session into their own course curriculum and ensure that students attend sessions. Secondly, it seems that students need to be escorted for such activities otherwise they are unlikely to take the responsibility to attend them. The table below lists the student number that attended for each session during semester 2, 2014.

Table 1: Attendance Record for Academic Skills sessions semester 2, 2014

Day/Time	Topic	Attendance
Wednesday 6th Aug 10am-11am	Time Management, Study Strategies and Avoiding procrastination	37 (Alafua Students)
Thursday 14th Aug 10am-11am	Unpacking Assignment Questions and Assignment Planning	55 (Alafua Students)
Thursday 28th Aug 10am-11am	Active and Critical Reading	25 (Alafua Students)
Thursday 18th Sept 10am-11am	Argument Development and Referencing	30 (Emalus Students)
Thursday 2nd October 10am-11am	Writing Literature Reviews	1 (Emalus Student)
Thursday 16th October 10am-11am	Transforming notes for study purposes	0 Attendance
Thursday 30th October 10am-11am	Preparing for Exams	0 Attendance

A similar initiative was undertaken by another academic staff from the Alafua campus in 2015 for a 300 level Agriculture course. There were seven students altogether in this class and were working on their assignment, which was a research proposal. The lecturer advised his students to seek SLS support in writing, referencing and proposal structure. Language use is a concerning issue for students, especially those located on the outer campuses. Students are asked to visit SLS for language and assignment structure support. Another problem that the academic staff had brought to light was use and referencing of sources. Students have been found to be quite careless and inconsistent in their use of referencing. To address these issues in his students' assignments, the instructor made it mandatory for them to seek SLS services prior to the submission of their assignments. The students were provided with SLS staff email and were expected to seek support. The SLS staff was also expected to provide feedback to the academic staff on which students had sought support. Students were advised by their lecturer that this form of assistance would positively impact their language and grammar, as well as referencing and essay structure marks, which in turn would impact the overall assignment mark. All seven students sought support through email where SLS staff was able to provide feedback on language use and structure of the assignment. In some cases, students returned to SLS to review their reworked drafts. This proved quite helpful for the lecturer. It also enabled the submission of a better written assignment for the students. The lecturer subsequently reported that "...Students are happy with your assistance, and they made substantial improvements." (Kant, personal communication, March 31, 2015).

As with staff intervention for the Academic Skills sessions, embedding SLS for some aspects of assignment tasks enables students to benefit from services available to them. Furthermore, there is a higher likelihood that some students may continue to seek support for other assignments. This was evident in semester 2, 2015 where two of the seven students from the 300-level agriculture course sought SLS services for new course assignments through email.

Self-Regulation

Self-regulation is essential for academic success (Brookfield, 2013), and needs to be nurtured in students who are studying through distance and online modes (McMahon & Oliver, 2001).

Self-regulation maintains that learners assume responsibility for their own learning. They proactively seek knowledge and seek to identify and improve gaps in the knowledge acquisition process (Zimmerman, 1990, p. 5). Zimmerman further argues (1990, p. 5) that this attitude is present in most learners however, the systematic use of behavioural, metacognitive and motivational strategies are more apparent in learners who are deemed to be self-regulated. The motive to self-regulate is stemmed in external rewards and the continuous urge to motivate the self towards higher learning goals after accomplishing existing goals.

For academic study to be successful, learners therefore need to seek out support services that can ensure that they are adequately equipped with effective learning strategies and academic skills. The fact that students needed to be led to REACT sessions and that SLS support was made mandatory for some aspects of an assignment, suggests that most students do not actively nurture self-regulatory traits in themselves. If they are not able to attend REACT sessions, they could resort to email correspondence with their faculty SLS staff for additional assistance and resources, however, as records show, this only eventuates when lecturers require them to seek support. While Moore (1973) explains that students studying through distance modes are expected to assume more autonomy, Field, Duffy and Higgins (2014) maintain that nurturing self-regulated skills cannot be left to the learners' responsibility. It is necessary that academic staff build course components that allow students to learn self-directed skills and use support services when necessary for the successful completion of the course. This point strongly echoes sentiments for culturally relevant support for Pacific Island students stated earlier. The perception seems to be that Pacific students are passive learners who need to be coerced into participating in support activities. Thus without the 'push' from course lecturers to seek out additional assistance, very few students will take the initiative to actively pursue support which identifies improvement areas on assignments or other study skills.

Conclusion

USP has ensured that online mechanisms and learning support are available and accessible for its students to benefit from all learning opportunities. This article has raised the issue that despite the availability of these resources, students continue to under-utilise them, which consequently prevents them benefiting from adequate support. One of the reasons attributed to this situation is the expectation that students will seek support through their own resourcefulness. Following this, the second reason is the possible poor self-regulation on the part of students which could otherwise motivate them to seek additional support for their studies.

Now that most of the larger campuses have their own SLS centres with full time staff in place, students will have greater access to face learning support services. However, SLS activities will only become meaningful if students are encouraged to use their services to the fullest capacity. As such, this article recommends stronger collaboration between academic and SLS staff to identify approaches that would work in the students' best interest. There is a further need for staff to actively nurture intrinsic attributes such as self-regulation.

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Directions:

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